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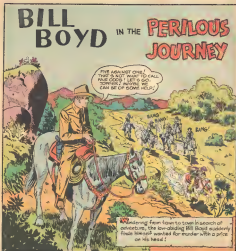
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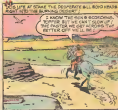
















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RUSTLER'S RANGE

By Dick Kneas



NO ONE seemed to be able to stop the rustlers that year on Grand Prairie. Every waddy that worked for the big cow outfits—the Circle K, the Double O, the Morgan spread—was riding day and night, and still the rustling continued!

A slick bunch of cow thieves was at work. First they hit, hard and sudden at the Double O, making off with a herd of prize, grass-fattened steers. Two nights later, they raided somewhere else. Again and again they made their hit—never losing close, never running home a loser.

Jeff Scott, boss of the Lazy J outfit, was phony worried.

"We've got big, like some of these other outfits," he said to his grizzled old ranch hand, Dad Parker. "So far we've been lucky. The rustlers haven't hit us. But what if they do, Dad? What if they get away with seventy-five or a hundred head? It'll just about break me—and I won't be able to make payments on the bank!"

Dad Parker shook his gray head. "They're a mean bunch, son," he said. "Can't tell where they'll strike next. But I reckon all we can do is ride hard day and night—with loaded rifles!"

Jeff gripped the old man's shoulder. "That's it, Dad," he said. "If we keep our stock close in, and watch them steady, maybe we'll stand a chance."

So, for four nights, the young rancher and the old hired hand rode hard on the Lazy J outfit. One rode on the high ground, half-hidden in the mesquite and shrub oak of the gently mountaining slope. The other stayed on the fringe of the herd, constantly on the alert for trouble.

For four nights they waited, and on the fifth, the rustlers hit!

Jeff Scott, riding on the slope, heard them first, riding fast and hard. He fired his gun in the air twice, as a signal to Dad Parker. Then, seeing his point horse, he steered down

toward the prairie to hold the rustlers off from his side. There was a brief gun-battle. Colts and flaming streaks through the night, and the wild scene of burnt powder half-obscured the terrified herd.

But the rustlers hadn't expected to fight—and that wasn't their strong point anyway. After five minutes of firing in darkness gray shadowed, they put the spurs to their mounts and wheeled away.

As they disappeared in the blackness, a cry floated back from one of them—"Don't be too happy, Scott! We'll be back for you soon!"

THE lean young rancher dismounted, one hand gripping his shoulder. A lucky hit shot of one of the rustlers had hit his shoulder; a flesh wound, but a painful one.

Hotting the ground, Jeff called out, "Dad! Dad! Where are you?"

The only reply was a faint groan that could hardly be heard above the howling of the frightened calves. Scrambling through the dark, searching desperately, Jeff finally found the old man. He was on the ground, half bent over and clutching his chest. As Jeff came up to him, Dad managed to look up and whisper, "I'm hurt, son. Hurt . . . pretty bad . . ."

The doctor came from Primmville to tend the old man. He took the bullet out, bandaged him and put him in bed. After fixing Jeff's less serious wound, the medical man shook his head.

"If Dad tries to get up before a couple of weeks, he'll be committing suicide." He looked at Jeff and hesitated. "I'd like to tell you the same, but it wouldn't be true. You can get around—even though it'll hurt. But take it easy, son! You can't lick a gang of rustlers off by yourself. That'll be suicide, if you try it."

He left in the late morning, after giving Jeff full instructions on caring for the old man.

Sitting by Dad's bedside, Jeff heard the waddy rancher, "Listen, boy! You can't . . .

fight . . . them all by . . . yourself . . . None of the other . . . outfits have stopped them . . . Better give up. Better put your prize stock . . . in Star Horn Canyon . . . and let them have the . . . others. You're wounded . . . too . . . hey . . ."

Gravely, Jeff Scott shook his head.

Star Horn Canyon was a narrow, thin-mouthed canyon that opened off the rangehead. It was long enough to hold the herd penned up, but not big enough to feed them for more than a day. No, he couldn't keep all his stock there—and he'd be hung and quartered before he'd save just a few and let the rustlers take the rest!

SUDDENLY, the young rustler stood up. Maybe there was another plan . . . another possibility . . .

Harrying out of the ranchhouse, he called the paint horse to him. Favoring his aching shoulder, he pulled himself onto the pinto. There was a job to be done—and it had to be done pronto!

It was the very next night that the rustlers struck again. Jeff had been watching on the slope, half-hidden beside a tall cottonwood. His shoulder, though it was healing, was paining more and more. But when he heard the drawing of horns on the night air again, his head snapped up sharply.

"Here they come! Now we'll see what happens!"

Instead of riding down toward the herd, the rustler pushed his pony along the slope. Soon, he would tell by the shrill cries of the rustlers, and by the soft padding sound of hundreds of unshod hooves, that the herd was in motion. Riding slowly, he kept parallel to it, and out of sight. After half an hour had passed, he moved the point ahead a little faster.

Then, dismounting beside a huge boulder, he crouched and drew forth a wooden box. In it were several rows of dynamite sticks and a fuse. He wired, fastening to the hard, and peering through the dark. Several hundred yards away, directly opposite him, was the narrow entrance to Star Horn Canyon.

It had but the one entrance—and its walls were steep and high—too high to climb.

Now the herd and the rustlers were coming up. Now they were directly between him and the canyon.

Jeff Scott lit a sulphur match with his thumb-nail.

"Here goes nothing," he said, and touched it to the dynamite fuse. The powder-filled cord began to splutter. He flung himself to the ground, far on the other side of the boulder.

The dynamite went off with an earth-shattering explosion. A brilliant flash lit up the ground for many yards around. Bawling in sudden terror, the herd scattered directly away from the explosion—and thundered toward the entrance to Star Horn Canyon. In a moment, they were stampeding into the canyon—with the rustlers riding after them in hot pursuit.

Jeff Scott waited until the last cow and the last rustler had disappeared into the canyon.

Then he took out his carbine and placed himself flat on the ground, facing the canyon entrance. A pale moon had come out, enough to shoot by. He was going to be there quite a while. Might as well be comfortable.

IT WAS noon the next day before the sheriff and a posse showed up. Neighboring ranchmen had sent word to them that firing had been heard through the night—as they hastily decided to investigate. When he heard what Jeff had done, the sheriff pushed the bronco back on his head and whistled steadily.

"You mean—you've got the rustler gang bottled up in there?" he muttered.

"That's right," Jeff nodded. "They went in after the cattle, and there's only one way to get out. Every time they tried to come out, I waved them. After a while," and he waved the smooth gray barrel of the carbine, "after a while . . . they stopped trying. I think you can round them up pretty easy now, Sheriff. I'm going home—I'm done."

THE END



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